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An analysis of the UNAOC Media Program:
the 'Global Experts' project and the
'Multimedia Projects and Videos on cross-
cultural issues' initiative

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This research programme focuses on a range of issues, theoretical and practical, related to cultural diversity and difference. Migration and media are twin facets of globalization, the one demographic, with crucial spatio-temporal consequences, and the other cultural and technological. While migration often poses the question of cultural difference, diverse forms of media play a key role in enabling representation, thus forging modes of communication. Through a focus on the role of media, this research programme explores the extent to which the latter bridges cultural differences in contexts of migration and facilitates intercultural dialogue. Of interest too are the ways in which media can mobilize societies and cultures. Also relevant is the role of media in triggering migration, as well as in connecting migrants to their homelands.

An analysis of the UNAOC Media Program: the 'Global Experts' project and the 'Multimedia Projects and Videos on cross-cultural issues' initiative

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Summary

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) has, from its inception, considered media to be central to the promotion of intercultural dialogue. This report examines the UNAOC's Media Program in the light of both: its preparatory documents and media analyses, and the way in which the strategy has been enacted. This report proposes that the UNAOC needs to be explicit about the purpose of the dialogue it is intending to engender, and about who are the intended participants to it. This will enable a better analysis of the success and importance of the initiatives undertaken. It will argue that the way in which the Media Program has in fact been enacted thus far could be construed as being insufficiently representative.

Evidence

The role of media in promoting intercultural dialogue

In considering the form of intercultural dialogue, it is crucial to examine the role of media. Indeed, one commentator has even referred to true intercultural dialogue as a 'dialogue by media' (Gary Sick, quoted in Lynch 2000 212 n20). One report in particular of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) presents media as crucial to how we understand the world and its people (Howard et al. 2006). It emphasises the media's role in reinforcing stereotypes, biases and divisions

between communities, and argues that '[n]o where has the reproduction of the so-called clash [of civilizations] been more powerful than in the two media markets of the West and the Muslim world' (Howard et al. 2006 2). There seem to be two elements to the UNAOC's media strategy, and to its strategy relating to intercultural dialogue more generally. Firstly, there is the promotion of dialogue within the UNAOC itself. Secondly, there is promotion of dialogue with those not within the UNAOC project. However, these can often become conflated.

The above-mentioned UNAOC report on media starts with this quotation:

It is time to recognize that the true tutors of our children are no longer the school teachers and university professors, but the filmmakers, advertising executives and pop culture purveyors. Disney does more than Duke, Spielberg outweighs Stanford, MTV trumps MIT (Benjamin Barber, quoted in Howard et al. 2006).

It is, then, they argue, important in understanding intercultural dialogue, both who conducts it and where, but also who *controls* it. It is also, crucial to note here, and throughout the analysis of the UNAOC Media Program, the tacit assumption of the US cultural framework.¹ For example, though it is not stated, in this quotation, Disney, Duke, Spielberg, Stanford, MTV and MIT are all American cultural or academic institutions. This is particularly interesting given the US did not join the UNAOC Group of Friends until 2010, half a decade after its inception, and that all the initiatives within the Media Program have developed since this time (see Appendix).

The UNAOC report emphasizes importance of understanding the role of media to help or hinder the dialogue. Noting, for example, the 'racist or essentialized caricatures' of Arabs and Muslims in American films screened in Arab and Muslim countries (Howard et al. 4; discussing 2001 Olive Branch Press report). It goes on:

The impact of the *insult* (popular entertainment media that is disrespectful toward Islam and Muslims) on top of the *injury* (news of Muslim victimization told from a Muslim perspective) is to feed a humiliation, resentment, and even rage in much of the Muslim world against Western sources of both policy and what is viewed as propaganda aimed at Islam and Muslims (Howard et al. 2006 4).

For western audiences, meanwhile, they argue that this leads to a creation and reinforcement of fear.

This UNAOC report therefore prioritizes the creation of dialogue within pop culture and media more generally. This problem was already being raised in the early 1990s. For example Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's now classic 1994 book, *The Manufacturing of Consent* (also made into a television programme), referred to two key problems in the United States regarding media and the undermining of democracy. They noted that ordinary people were being overwhelmed with mindless media output, leaving them unable to discern what is important, and that mass media was regarded like any other business, controlled in a way to make most profit rather than to engender debate. Indeed, Herman and Chomsky noted that the resulting filters happen so naturally that

¹ Consider, for example, Michael Billig's analysis of the powerful use of 'the' or 'national' without reference to the specific context of the statement (Billig 2008 108). This will also be relevant to the analyses of the specific Media Program initiatives discussed below.

newsmen with integrity do not even notice they are affected by them.

This current report examines the UNAOC's Media Program, focussing on its popular media element, and asks whether it is addressing the concerns raised here. A more detailed overview of the UNAOC Media Program as a whole is given in the table in the Appendix.

An overview of the UNAOC Media Program²

The UNAOC Media Program has four stated objectives, which have each led to a range of initiatives with various partner institutions and collaborators. The four objectives (stated as they appear on the UNAOC website) are to:

Box 1: The four objectives of the UNAOC media strategy

- Convene editors and owners to raise awareness around sensitive cross cultural issues (religion, diversity, migration, etc) and establish a platform for dialogue
- Offer skill building and training exercises for journalists and provide a unique cross cultural approach both on content and format
- Monitor media content and coverage of cross-cultural issues
- Increase journalists and public understanding of complex cross cultural issues through online resources.

In the Appendix, these objectives are tabulated, with the initiatives and projects that have been undertaken under the banner of each objective indicated, along with the cooperating institutions in each case. It is interesting to notice in this table a geographical bias towards the US and Europe. It is also of note that, despite discussion of the importance of generalised media literacy,³ initiatives such as that described in (Martín Galán 2011) are not part of the Media Program. That said, some related initiatives fall under 'Plural+' and other youth programs of the UNAOC.⁴

This report focuses on the last of the objectives, and its two initiatives: the 'Global Experts' project and the 'Multimedia Projects and Videos on cross-cultural issues' initiative. Before proceeding with the more in-depth analysis, it is worth noting two facts about the projects undertaken within the UNAOC Media Program. Firstly, all of the materials available online relating to the Media Program itself are in English (information on other related initiatives such as 'Plural+', are available also in Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish). While some of the conferences explicitly note that there was the opportunity to speak in local languages, the material is now available only in English.

Secondly, in every one of the UNAOC projects undertaken as part of the Media Program, the UNAOC were partnered with at least one US academic or corporate institution (most frequently the University of Missouri), and often several such institutions. Where there is non-US collaboration, it is usually with European institutions, and very rarely with institutions from the Middle East and North Africa

² Website of the UNAOC Media Program: <http://www.unaoc.org/communities/media-program/>

³ E.g. see: <http://www.unaoc.org/actions/online-platforms/mle/>

⁴ website of 'Plural+' Project: <http://pluralplus.unaoc.org>

(MENA) region. Institutions from the other global regions are not involved. For example, the research undertaken under the third objective has been in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. This is not to say that these are not important fields of research, but in an apparently international organization like the UNAOC, and as part of an apparently global set of objectives, it is important to explain explicitly this regional bias.

*The UNAOC's 'Global Experts' project*⁵

According to the UNAOC website, the 'Global Experts' project:

...gives journalists access to a series of high-level experts available to give in-depth commentary on current cross-culturally difficult topics.⁶

And the 'Global Experts' site goes on to state that it:

...encourages a broad diversity of experts and opinion leaders to share their perspectives on issues that go to the core of relations among diverse communities, broadening the choice of available commentary.⁷

It is interesting, however, to note the geographical focus of the experts included. The site defines eight geographical regions of expertise: Asia, Balkans, Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, North Africa and Middle East, North America, Oceania and Sub Saharan Africa. Table 1 below sets out where the experts are located for each area of expertise.

Two important elements can be observed. Firstly, by the large number of experts recruited, it is apparent that certain regions are considered of particular importance: Europe, North Africa and the Middle East and North America. Secondly, it is possible to observe that the experts are primarily located in Europe and North America. Sub-Saharan African countries, the Caribbean, and other Small Island States are largely not members of the Group of Friends of the UNAOC (Bloom 2013, Appendix). Table 1 reinforces the implication that these regions are not considered to be of much interest to the UNAOC project.

5 Website of the UNAOC Global Experts Project: <http://www.theglobalexperts.org>

6 <http://www.unaoc.org/communities/media-program/>

7 <http://www.theglobalexperts.org/about>

Table 1: Location of experts for the UNAOC's 'Global Experts' project, according to region of expertise⁸

	Region of Expertise							
	Asia	Balkans	Europe	Latin America and the Caribbean	North Africa and Middle East	North America	Oceania	Sub Saharan Africa
Location stated, given by continent								
Africa	1	0	2	0	5	3	0	3
Asia	26	1	7	1	17	3	0	3
Australasia	5	0	1	0	6	1	9	1
Europe	25	8	102	6	44	14	1	10
North America	31	8	38	9	64	88	3	20
South America	0	0	0	5	2	0	0	0
Total	88	17	150	26	138	109	13	37

Further, one country, the United States, hosts more of the UNAOC's experts than any other:

Table 2: Experts in the UNAOC's 'Global Experts' project deriving from the United States, in absolute numbers, and as a proportion of all experts, for each region of expertise

	Region of Expertise							
	Asia	Balkans	Europe	Latin America and the Caribbean	North Africa and Middle East	North America	Oceania	Sub Saharan Africa
From USA	31	8	38	8	63	87	3	20
% of total number of experts on each region	35%	47%	25%	31%	46%	80%	23%	54%

From this table, it can be seen that between about a quarter and four-fifths of the UNAOC's experts for any given region are based in the United States. This raises questions about the supposed global nature of the initiative and could be seen to undermine the intended balance and bias limitation.

It is also interesting to notice, in Table 3 below, that the gender composition of the experts

⁸ Note that some experts list more than one region of expertise, and a small number list more than one location. Where this occurs, the person is tallied more than once in order to demonstrate more clearly the geographical spread, rather than selecting arbitrarily between the locations listed.

is overwhelmingly male, with the experts on the Latin America and the Caribbean Region being proportionally most female, at just over a third. For the three regions of most interest to the UNAOC, the gender balance is particularly striking, with the percentage of women experts at 21% for Europe, 15% for North Africa and the Middle East and 30% for North America.

Table 3: The gender of experts in the UNAOC ‘Global Experts’ project, given by regional expertise

Regional expertise	Number men (%)	Number women (%)	Total
Asia	70 (81%)	16 (19%)	86
Balkans	13 (76%)	4 (24%)	17
Europe	110 (79%)	30 (21%)	140
Latin America and the Caribbean	13 (65%)	7 (35%)	20
North Africa and the Middle East	110 (85%)	19 (15%)	129
North America	74 (70%)	31 (30%)	105
Oceania	11 (85%)	2 (15%)	13
Sub Saharan Africa	27 (75%)	9 (25%)	36

While the notion of the ‘Global Experts’ project is a positive one, it seems clear that the project as it is currently instantiated can risk appearing to be one of American-driven liberal propaganda. The experts derive primarily from the US and Europe and these regions and MENA are the overwhelming focus. This puts pay to the idea of UNAOC as a truly global initiative that is moving away from a focus on clash between the West and Islam. The gender imbalance of experts is striking, and could indicate the absence of a genuine effort to seek voices not usually heard, as could the overwhelmingly ethnic European population of the experts. Notably, of the only nine experts based in Africa, not one of them is Black.

The UNAOC ‘Multimedia Project and Videos on cross-cultural issues’ initiative

There have been three projects related to this initiative: *Covering Migration: Challenges Met and Not Met*⁹ (January 2013), *100 Questions about Islam*¹⁰ (February 2012), and *Journeys of Belonging*¹¹ (November 2012). This section examines each project in turn, in the order listed by UNAOC.

Covering Migration: Challenges Met and Not Met

This project resulted in a series of five short videos, published online in January 2013. They are now available through the UNAOC’s YouTube channel. They are aimed at journalists who are reporting on migration. As can be seen from the list in Table 4, below, the organizations contributing to the discussion are almost entirely based in Europe. Four of these are European organizations, six are

9 As is explained in the text, there are several links to the various videos made as part of this project.

10 UNAOC link to this YouTube sequence: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjbohSQe7q0&playnext=1&list=PL0E13CCB4C397D5A3&feature=results_main however, as is explained in the text, other partners link to other selections of videos.

11 Journeys of Belonging website: <http://www.journeysofbelonging.org>

international organizations based in Europe. One of those listed is from the MENA region.

Table 4: Covering Migration: Challenges Met and Not Met, where to find the videos, and where the contributing institutions are based

Title of video	Link	Institutions included (in order of first appearance), and where they are based
1. What are the best practices?	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErzwsbihLKY&list=UU1UIqCsaXeUCSGR8cfcaXAQ&index=1	Institut Panos (France), Jordan Media Institute (Jordan), News Xchange (various, Europe), Ethical Journalism Network (Belgium, Switzerland, France, Austria, UK, USA, Canada),
2. What is the most problematic area of migration coverage?	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGQe89L6zPs&list=UU1UIqCsaXeUCSGR8cfcaXAQ	France Terre d'Asile (France), Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Switzerland), Geneva Centre for Security Policy (Switzerland),
3. How can media outlets improve coverage?	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENrb6dlbWcw&list=UU1UIqCsaXeUCSGR8cfcaXAQ	International Organization for Migration (Switzerland), UNESCO (France), OHCHR (Switzerland), Global Editors Network (France)
4. Why is improving the coverage such a pressing issue	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sT6QTYmu140&list=UU1UIqCsaXeUCSGR8cfcaXAQ	
5. How would you describe the current climate of the media coverage of migration?	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wmo4m3KOfM&list=UU1UIqCsaXeUCSGR8cfcaXAQ	

These videos raise some interesting and important questions. For example, Khaled Khöser of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, notes in the fourth video, the importance that journalists communicate directly with the groups they are trying to portray, as well as the groups they are trying to speak to. This is taken further in the third video by Fackson Banda of UNESCO, who notes that we rarely get to hear migrants as spokespersons themselves, assuming their own agency. He comments: 'an effective story would be one that addressed their issues from their point of view'. This is a valuable and important insight, but it is not clear that this is really the aim of the UNAOC Media Program, as detailed here.

100 Questions about Islam

The 100 Questions about Islam project was produced by the UNAOC in association with the British Council and an institute of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University¹² in the United States. It was produced by the Missouri School of Journalism. It is difficult to gain access to the full range of videos produced for the project. From the UNAOC website, are linked only three interviews, with two professors, from George Mason University and Georgia State University, and a Foreign Correspondent for the US National Public Radio. From the website of the British Council, more clips (120) are available, but it is not clear that they are all from this joint project with UNAOC. It is difficult, therefore, to assess the impact and outputs of the project.

Journeys of Belonging

The Journeys of Belonging project, whose website is hosted through that of Missouri University,

¹² The Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

provides an interesting insight into the project of the UNAOC. It is clearly directed at a 'Western' audience, and offers an interesting insight into the problem of defining 'us' and 'them' within this context, problematizing the ease with which initiatives like the UNAOC force people into one or another discrete identity group. The seventeen speakers, who are of a diverse range of backgrounds, are asked a mix of the sixteen questions in the box below:

Box 2: Questions addressed in the *Journeys of Belonging* project

What have you learned from people of different backgrounds?
 How can others be more sensitive to global concerns?
 How has communication helped to establish global relationships?
 How have gender/sexual orientation roles affected you?
 What does it mean to be a global citizen?
 How have you committed to learning about other cultures?
 How are you working to make the world a better place?
 How does your activism aim to bring global change?
 What role has your youth played in shaping your identity?
 How has your work shaped your identity?
 How has international turmoil affected your identity?
 How has religion impacted on your identity?
 In what ways has there been tension with your identity?
 In what ways has your identity changed over time?
 What does identity mean to you?

The speakers are interesting and diverse and, unlike in some of the other initiatives, are not derived solely from Muslim communities, or from communities talking about Muslim communities. For example, Anna Urombi, with roots from Uganda, Russia, Ukraine and Sweden, and a diverse and varied professional experience, presents herself in a way that questions the assumptions that individuals can be easily located in one or another cultural or civilizational group.

Conclusions and recommendations

There are two elements to the UNAOC's approach to intercultural dialogue apparent through the Media Program. Firstly, there is the dialogue within the Alliance, between persons with slightly different approaches, but essentially subscribing to the UNAOC's prevailing liberal ideology. This is seen in the Forums, for example, and in the large range of other events and initiatives. Secondly, there is a proselytizing sort of dialogue, which communicates with those who are not yet in the Alliance.

The UNAOC's Media Program seems to appeal to both of these concerns. On the one hand, it provides training and information for those within the UNAOC to enhance reporting of certain matters regarding culture within societies. On the other hand, it offers analyses of practices, particularly of the US, regarding impact upon the perception, particularly of the US, in other parts of the world; and upon perceptions of other parts of the world within UNAOC members, particularly the US.

Regarding the first of these, the UNAOC Media Program could seem to resemble an internally reinforcing propaganda mechanism. The list of 'Global Experts' are overwhelmingly White males

based in the United States and do not seem to offer a rounded range of perspectives. In favour of free speech, John Stuart Mill, a key forefather of the modern liberal tradition, noted that:

...the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind (Mill 1859 25).

It could be argued that the list of 'Global Experts' at least offers an alternative to prevailing opinion in the US. However, it is important not only to hear these views. Mill goes on:

He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that.

and

Nor is it enough, that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations... (Mill 1859 42)

What is needed, then, is not an alternative Western-dominated discourse, but the opportunity to have insights into perspectives from across the world. This is not yet provided by the UNAOC 'Global Experts' project.

The 'Multimedia Project and Videos on cross-cultural issues' initiative aims to provide resources to journalists in order to question assumptions about Islam, immigration and identity. Although the participants and collaborating institutions are again predominantly from the US and Europe, this initiative does indeed challenge some of the underlying assumptions of the UNAOC project itself. For example, the speakers in the *Journeys of Belonging* film present mixed and complex identities, tied to several different cultural and 'civilizational' groupings. They show identity based on sexuality, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality, and citizenship, and engage with how different aspects of this have become important in different ways. They also discuss how different elements within their own identities can seem to clash. It is interesting to consider this as the UNAOC project goes forward, to question the notion of a well-defined civilizational discourse with discrete players and obvious contentions.

This report concludes with four recommendations for the UNAOC Media Program:

- The 'Global Experts' project could benefit from recruiting experts from a more diverse range of backgrounds, including those based in the regions to which their expertise is directed, and from a range of perspectives within that.
- The 'Multimedia Project and Videos on cross-cultural issues' initiative is a good example of how the UNAOC would increase its self-criticism. This initiative has demonstrated that even among the experts there is a criticism of the notion of the Alliance itself, in line with high-level political criticisms. It is crucial to engage with this openly and directly.
- As part of addressing these earlier concerns, will be the need to examine what is the purpose of the intercultural dialogue to be promoted by the UNAOC.
- It would be useful for the initiatives to be clear about what aspect of the concerns they

are addressing. For example, this would include clarifying whether the dialogue is intended to be internal to the Alliance or external to it.

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Please note: for simplicity, links to websites referred to in the text are given as footnotes.

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Appendix: UNAOC Media Project objectives

Objectives	Initiatives	Organizations involved
<p>Convene editors and owners to raise awareness around sensitive cross cultural issues (religion, diversity, migration, etc) and establish a platform for dialogue.</p>	<p>Editors and Media Owners Engagement <i>There have so far been two workshops, held in 2013, in January in France and March in Switzerland.</i></p>	<p>France workshop (organized with Global Editors Network) Speakers were from the following organizations: CERI-Sciences Po, IOM, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Migration Policy Group, UNHCR, Ethical Journalism Network, Observatoire Transmedia. (note: of the 17 Editors in Chief attending, 11 were from the EU, 2 from non-EU Europe, and 4 from MENA) Switzerland workshop (organized with Club Suisse de la presse) Speakers were from the following organizations: IOM, Panos Institute, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, University of Applied Sciences Chur, Zurich University</p>
<p>Offer skill building and training exercises for journalists and provide a unique cross cultural approach both on content and format</p>	<p>Skill and Capacity Building for Journalists: <i>There have so far been two training workshops, in Tunisia in November 2012 and in Jordan in April 2013. There was also a journalists' workshop as part of the UNAOC Global Forum in March 2013, and there have been two training courses, in the USA in October 2011 and in Egypt in February 2010.</i></p>	<p>Jordan workshop: Run by UNAOC and Google for 25 journalists from the US and the Middle East and North Africa. Tunisia workshop: paid for by Google, led by UNAOC, World Bank Institute, African Media Initiative. For journalists from Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria.¹³ (note: these were in fact part of a larger programme organized by Google in association with eight regional academic and journalistic organizations) USA workshop: Run by the New York Times to offer course to Tunisian, Egyptian, Moroccan, French and American journalists regarding the covering of elections. Egypt workshop: organized by the International Center for Journalists, supported by UNAOC. 40 journalists from 'the Arab world, Europe, Indonesia, Pakistan and the United States'.</p>

<p>Monitor media content and coverage of cross-cultural issues</p>	<p>Monitor Media Content and Coverage: <i>There has been a research project, working with universities and research institutions, looking into media coverage of migration in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. The project has been presented in February 2013.</i></p>	<p>Institutions involved: King's College (Canada), Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (France), Deutsche Welle Akademie (Germany), Christelijke Hogeschool Ede (The Netherlands), University of Missouri (United States).¹⁴ Expert advisors came from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and was co-funded by the Open Society Fund to Counter Xenophobia.</p>
<p>Increase journalists and public understanding of complex cross cultural issues through online resources</p>	<p>Global Experts: <i>The Global Experts initiative was launched by the UNAOC and now has a database of several hundred experts in a range of issues. It also has produced a series of nine articles on Youth, Civic Engagement and Democratic Processes in March 2012, and a series of fifteen articles on Religion and Public Space in May 2011.</i></p> <p>Multimedia Projects and Videos on cross-cultural issues: <i>In cooperation with the British Council and the Missouri School of Journalism, the UNAOC has produced seven video projects aimed at journalists. Five videos from January 2013 are entitled 'Covering Migration', one from February 2012 entitled '100 Questions about Islam', and one from November 2012 entitled 'Journeys of Belonging'.</i></p>	<p>Multimedia project is in association with British Council, Missouri School of Journalism and Reynolds Journalism Institute</p>
<p>Other</p>	<p>Events and Debates: <i>There have been three key events organized, a Panel discussion on diversity in the media in the USA in November 2012, a Media Conference in Tahrir Square in Egypt in April 2011, and a debate on the future of Muslim-West relations in the USA in July 2010.</i></p>	

¹⁴ Interestingly, the University of Missouri was also involved in some way with the enacting of every other objective.

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